

Ways to Help Employees Cope with a Critical Incident

Overview

Ways managers can support employees after a critical incident.

- First steps
- Helping employees before the arrival of the crisis team
- Emotional reactions
- How to respond
- The importance of taking care of yourself
- Your EAP can help

A critical incident is any sudden or unexpected traumatic event that affects people's emotional lives, feelings of safety, and ability to cope. It might be a robbery or assault that occurred in the workplace, a sudden accident or death at work, the murder or suicide of an employee, or domestic abuse that impacts the workplace. Floods, fires, hurricanes, airplane crashes, and acts of terrorism are other examples of critical incidents that may occur outside of the job and significantly impact a large number of employees. Whatever the trauma, employees may be affected for days, weeks, or even months afterwards.

First steps

When a crisis, trauma, or critical incident has occurred in your workplace, you are in the position to coordinate an appropriate and compassionate response to the situation.

- *Make sure everyone is safe and notify appropriate institutions as necessary*, such as police and fire departments and company security. Be sure to inform the appropriate personnel in your company such as Human Resources, Health and Safety, designated trauma response coordinators and media relations.
- *Call your employee assistance program (EAP)*. Every crisis, trauma, or critical incident is different. An EAP counselor will discuss ways to respond to the crisis at hand, given the specifics of the incident and your organization. When you call, be sure to
 - Describe the incident -- who, what, when, where, why, and how.
 - Describe the reactions of employees and how your company has responded.
 - State your own needs, and the needs of your company.
 - Let the EAP counselor know if there are any concurrent stressors.
- *Acknowledge that the critical incident has occurred*. Being forthright and providing factual information to your employees can help stop rumors from spreading. Provide a consistent message to all groups. Address any rumors or concerns employees may have. Before making any announcements, be sure to check to see if your company has guidelines or policies about critical incidents.
- *Consider any legal implications before responding to the media or communicating to employees*. Most companies will designate a spokesperson to speak to the press and other media. Instruct employees what to do when approached by the media. Guard affected persons and any family from the media. Instruct telephone operators, receptionists, and other employees in what to say when the public questions them.

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- *Remember that traumatized employees need structure, peer support, facts and instructions on what to expect next.* This is particularly crucial if the individual has inadequate supports at home. Before employees leave, find out what they are planning to do with their time once they leave work. And encourage them to spend time with friends or family members.
- *Identify the employees most affected and encourage them to go to a quiet place with selected close friends or family that may have arrived.* But don't force them to be isolated if they'd prefer to stay with their co-workers.

Helping employees before the arrival of the crisis team

- *Show employees your concern and tell them about any steps you or the organization has taken or will take to deal with the crisis situation, and how they will be kept safe if applicable.*
- *Tell your employees that a crisis professional(s) will come to the worksite to provide help.* Have all involved employees attend a group-debriefing meeting.
- *If any employees of an impacted work group were not present when the crisis occurred they should still attend the group debriefing session.*
- *Predict that employees may experience strong emotional reactions either immediately or delayed.* These reactions are normal and are to be expected when individuals are closely involved with a traumatic event.
- *Discuss immediate work expectations and time off policies.* Consultation with your EAP crisis counselor may be helpful. For some affected persons time off is very helpful for others it can be very detrimental.
- *In the unfortunate event of casualties, contact family members of casualty victims.* It is best to send two management people to the home of each casualty or deceased employee to make arrangements for assistance without leaving the distressed persons alone. Remind family members that the EAP is available to them.

Emotional reactions

After a critical incident, employees may feel overwhelmed by the event. People may feel afraid or unsafe. They may experience symptoms of stress. The signs and symptoms of stress can be physical, mental, or emotional.

- *Expect a variety of reactions from employees.* Employees may experience feelings of shock, fear, anger, sadness, grief, and confusion following a critical incident. One of the most common effects of being involved in a traumatic incident is severe anxiety and inability to sleep. These feelings are normal, and will usually ease with time.
- *The length and intensity of each employee's feelings will vary.* Everyone is different and everyone reacts differently to a traumatic event. Some people may experience uncontrollable crying or emotional outbursts. Others may withdraw or appear numb.

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- *Reactions may be immediate, delayed, or ongoing.*

How to respond

Immediately after a critical incident, the primary concern is to provide safety, support, and stabilization.

- *Offer resources to employees.* Remind them to call the EAP. Consider organizing a group meeting to help process emotions and reactions to the critical event.
- *Encourage employees to talk about the experience and to express their feelings with each other and with their family, friends and other people who understand the details about the experience.*
- *Allow employees to feel a wide range of emotions* including guilt, shock, rage, fear, anger, remorse, sadness, or worry.
- *Let employees know that there are no “right” or “wrong” feelings or reactions.*
- *Listen to your employees.*
- *Don’t ignore your own feelings,* or expect to “do it all” or “fix it all” yourself.
- *Look for signs of obvious distress,* and refer distressed employees to the EAP for help. Signs of distress include
 - wandering aimlessly
 - unjustified angry out bursts
 - overall loss of emotional control shock like state
 - uncontrollable crying
 - staring
 - disorientation
 - isolation from group

Critical Incident Debriefings (CISD)

Setting up a CISD can provide a safe and receptive environment for employees to express their thoughts and feelings about the trauma in order to acknowledge the shared experience and to consolidate group support. When a trauma or shocking experience occurs, individuals often lose faith in their support systems. After a workplace crisis normal group support breaks down and individuals withdraw. Since it is the group unity and support that is threatened the group can provide the space and place for recovery and return to normalcy. A major component of the CISD process is to educate employees on the common symptoms they and their co-workers may be experiencing, to normalize their reactions and to encourage effective coping techniques.

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- *When coordinating a group debriefing, notify any affected managers and employees and request that they be on site when the trauma specialist arrives, even if they were not at the worksite when the trauma occurred.*
- *Encourage attendance and arrange for a quiet, private and comfortable room, with adequate seating for the debriefing to occur. Make sure you offer meetings that cover all shifts.*
- *Provide a consistent message to all groups. Address any rumors or concerns employees may have.*
- *The trauma specialist will meet with employees as a group and have them reconstruct the events in the order that they occurred to form a shared understanding of what happened.*

Communicating facts

You may wish to distribute a “fact sheet” to relieve confusion and curb the spread of rumors. You may consider doing this through a management chain, or e-mail. Your message should do the following:

- stick to the facts and clearly communicate what has occurred
- let employees know you will keep them informed as accurate information comes available
- express your organization’s concerns
- demonstrate awareness of feelings and concerns
- offer EAP services
- encourage the use of your EAP service for post-trauma assistance
- announce the time and location of onsite debriefing

The importance of taking care of yourself

Managers often overlook their own feelings during difficult times at work. It is important to take care of yourself during this time.

- *Pay attention to your physical and emotional health.*
- *Talk with other managers.* Managers who talk with and seek support from other managers during difficult times do better than those who do not.
- *Seek support for yourself.* Make use of the resources available to you at the company -- through HR, the EAP, or the employee resource program.

Your EAP can help

Your EAP can offer support to employees and managers throughout the stages of recovery and help people cope with the feelings that are common after a traumatic

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event. An important part of the recovery process for employees is knowing they can contact a consultant 24 hours a day to discuss the event and their reactions to it. The connection with the EAP consultant can be maintained throughout the phases of recovery. And in some cases, referrals can be made for long-term counseling. Remind employees that the EAP service is confidential and is offered free to them as a benefit paid for by your company.

- *Remind employees that the call and the service are confidential and are offered free to them as a benefit paid for by your company.*
- *Remind employees that they and their family members may contact the program 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for help.*

By providing support and resources to employees coping with a traumatic event, you can help reduce the long-term effects of a traumatic event on your workplace and the people you work with and care about.